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SUBJECT: GREEK ELECTIONS PART I: MECHANICS

11. (SBU) SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION: On September 16, Greek voters will go to the polls in snap elections called by Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis in mid-August before devastating fires claimed scores of lives, hundreds of thousands of acres of valuable forests, and billions of euros in damaged and lost property. Political fallout from the fires has added elements of drama and uncertainty to the contest, but many observers believe the ruling New Democracy party will still be able to maintain a majority in parliament, though perhaps just barely. We shall provide analyses of the parties, prospects and expected ministerial changes in subsequent messages. This message provides a primer on the Greek electoral system and the parties and personalities set to play leading roles in the election. END SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION.

RULES OF THE GAME

12. (SBU) General elections in Greece are conducted every four years, unless called early. According to the Greek constitution, the prime minister may request the president of the republic dissolve parliament and call early elections because of an issue of overriding national importance. In requesting the current elections, Karamanlis claimed he needed a fresh popular mandate six months before the end of his term in order to prepare "decisively" a budget entailing widespread reforms in Greece's cumbersome public sector and to move ahead with crucial -- but highly controversial -- changes in the state-run education system.

13. (SBU) The Greek electoral system has been one of "reinforced" proportional representation (RPR) since the 1960s. RPR is designed to give a boost to bigger political parties, essentially awarding them "bonus" seats to promote majority one-party governments. Ruling parties have often tweaked the RPR in order to improve their chances at the polls. Smaller parties have naturally opposed RPR, arguing that giving "bonus" seats to the big parties robs the smaller parties of opportunities to enter parliament.

14. (SBU) The September 16 elections will be conducted under yet another "new" RPR electoral law passed by a PASOK government in 2003. This year, 260 seats of the 300-seat unicameral parliament will be proportionally distributed to the parties crossing the three-percent threshold. The remaining 40 seats go automatically to the party with the largest number of votes. According to the arithmetic, when the leading party captures a minimum 42.5 percent of the vote it can form a government without partners but with the thinnest of parliamentary majorities (151-153 seats).

15. (SBU) The formula is such, however, that the more the

smaller parties gain, the less opportunity the leading party has to achieve a strong majority government. The larger parties are thus energized to sow as much discord amongst smaller contestants as possible in an effort to fracture and divide the small-party vote, preventing as many of the smaller players as possible from passing the three-percent threshold.

¶16. (SBU) There are no provisions for a second round of voting if no party wins a majority. In such an instance, the president would ask the leading party to form a coalition government. If the leading party were unable to do so, the president would ask the next highest vote-getter, and so on. Ultimately, if no government could be formed, the president would again dissolve parliament and new elections would be held in 30 days. Fortunately for Greece, most elections result in a majority winner and such cases of revolving-door governments have been rare.

ELECTION DAY

¶17. (SBU) On the day of the elections (always a Sunday), polling stations are open from sunrise to sunset and remain under the control of "judicial representatives," i.e. lawyers appointed by the Supreme Court. Voters are given a paper ballot for each party with lists of the parties, candidates. Voters choose one party's ballot and mark the desired candidates from the party's list. The ballots are tabulated by hand but results are reported by the judicial representatives via e-mail to the central tabulating body.

¶18. (SBU) By 11:00 PM, a reliable projection of results is usually available; most official results are available by morning; and virtually all results are available within 24

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hours. Parties often demand recounts and the process can take months, though in the interim, the already-named official winner will take his or her seat until a final decision on the recount.

¶19. (SBU) By law, voting is mandatory for all eligible voters. Not voting without a valid reason could provoke criminal prosecution and other administrative penalties, but in practice authorities never exercise this provision of the law.

THE TOP CONTENDERS

¶10. (SBU) In the years since the restoration of democracy in 1974, national elections have attracted dozens of political parties, most of them marginal and of no real consequence. On September 16, there will again be more than two dozen parties, but there are only five that will essentially contest the election:

-- New Democracy (ND): The ruling party of PM Karamanlis was founded in 1974 by the PM's uncle, the late Constantine Karamanlis. ND ruled Greece in the immediate post-Junta years but went into decline in the 1980s under strong pressure from the socialists. ND defines itself as a neo-liberal party with a strong commitment to the EU, free markets, and transatlantic relations. Under the leadership of PM Karamanlis, it has attempted a series of reforms that have stirred vociferous reaction from the parties of the left. Polls see ND a favorite to win the September 16 election despite serious bruising in recent weeks from unprecedented wildfires that have destroyed large swaths of southern Greece.

-- Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK): Main opposition party. Founded in 1974 by the late Andreas Papandreou, a Trotskyite professor of economics at Berkeley and other U.S. universities, PASOK had a meteoric trajectory in post-1974

politics and ruled Greece for over 20 years beginning in 1981. Early PASOK was bitterly anti-American, anti-NATO, and anti-Western Europe. Years in power moderated the party, and by the late 1990s it was attempting a "modernist" social democratic experiment but lost the 2004 election to ND. Now under the leadership of the late Papandreou's son George, PASOK is still wracked by internal strife and has been unable to capitalize on ND's woes.

-- The Communist Party of Greece (KKE) was formed in the 1920s and remains devoted to Soviet-style Marxism-Leninism. Traditionally controlling a minimum five percent of the Greek electorate, KKE has gained recently as desertions from PASOK replenish its ranks. Under General Secretary Aleka Papariga, KKE thrives on disruption and plays a front-line role in labor agitation and strike action in the public sector.

-- The Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA, also known as Synaspismos) has brought together various disparate leftist factions, including former communists, ecologists, feminists, and other "anti-capitalists." A New Left opponent of the KKE, SYRIZA claims it will never cooperate with other parties unless there is "meaningful convergence" on questions of policy according to SYRIZA's platform.

-- The Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) was established by an ousted ND parliamentarian, George Karatzaferis, and promotes a nationalist, anti-immigrant, populist platform. Accused of racism, anti-Semitism, and sympathies with national socialism, LAOS has seen its political fortunes pick up among older, lower-income, lower-education, disaffected voters. Latest polls put LAOS just over the three-percent threshold. Karatzaferis does not dismiss cooperation with other parties to form a coalition government.

COUNTRYMAN